

Positive Psychology A 7-Day Unit Plan for High School Psychology

Activity 6.2

Pleasurable Versus Philanthropic Activities— Which Bring More Happiness?

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Concept: Research on flow and optimism shows that positive affect lasts longer after a person is engaged in rewarding yet challenging activities rather than in activities that bring just physical or homeostatic pleasure. Students routinely engage in both types of activities, but the common belief is that pleasurable activities are more satisfying than philanthropic ones. This activity will help students become aware of their feelings in regard to these two types of activities and lead to discussion of which type of activity creates more positive affect.

Materials: None.

Description: Have students brainstorm and write down what activities they have participated in during the last week that were pleasurable and/or philanthropic. Have them reflect on how the activities differed, how each type of activity made them feel afterward, and how long those feelings lasted. After the discussion, instruct students to notice when they participate in activities that are pleasurable and/or philanthropic over the next 3 to 5 days (instructor's choice). They should address the following questions in their papers/discussion:

- What were the specific differences in each type of activity?
- What type of emotions did you feel during each type of activity?
- How long did the generally positive emotions you experienced during each type of activity remain with you afterward?

Note. Some students may not feel as though they participate in philanthropic activities. Although likely to be false, this belief may hinder students from completing this activity successfully. Some have argued that assigning philanthropy tends to neutralize the altruistic qualities of the activity, so it may be necessary to assign or suggest some simple philanthropic activities to students who have trouble with the concept. Some suggestions may include:

- Helping someone younger with homework
- Paying someone's toll
- Holding the door open for someone behind you
- Letting someone get in front of you in line at a restaurant or store
- Doing chores around the house that are not normally yours or that you weren't asked to do
- Serving in a soup kitchen or homeless shelter

These are only suggestions and might help students more accurately recognize philanthropic activities in their lives.

Discussion: The primary difference between pleasurable and philanthropic activities centers on who is affected by the activity. Pleasurable activities benefit the self, while philanthropic ones benefit others. Research on the “good life” suggests that people are happier when they are helping others rather than just benefiting the self.